

# Humor, Wit, Fun, and Satire

---

**James Russell Lowell**

**Libros de Baubo**



Estudios sobre la risa











James Russell Lowell

**HUMOR, WIT, FUN,  
AND SATIRE**



**Libros de Baubo**



Esta obra forma parte de la colección de estudios sobre la risa de la **Asociación de Estudios Literarios y de Cultura, A. C. (ADELyC)**, y puede descargarse gratuitamente en [www.librosdebaubo.net](http://www.librosdebaubo.net).

Contacto: [esteticasdelarisa@gmail.com](mailto:esteticasdelarisa@gmail.com)

Este libro digital está bajo una licencia Creative Commons: BY-NC-SA. Para saber más de la licencia *Reconocimiento-NoComercial-CompartirIgual*, por favor visite:



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Diseño del logo interior de **Libros de Baubo**:  
Adriana Ramírez de Alba

Título original de la obra digitalizada: *The Function of the Poet and Other Essays*

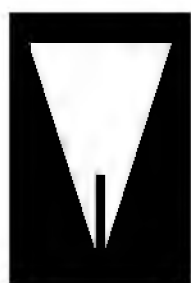
México: ADELyC, 2012.



# **Asociación de Estudios Literarios y de Cultura**

---

Estudios sobre la risa



Biblioteca  
Digital  
Libros de  
**Baubo**

La colección digital **Libros de Baubo** es coordinada por:

Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa

Karla Marrufo

El Comité Editorial de la **ADELyC, A. C.** está integrado por los siguientes miembros del Consejo Directivo:

Karla Marrufo

*Secretaria*

Martha Elena Munguía Zatarain

*Vicepresidenta*

Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa

*Presidenta*

# HUMOR, WIT, FUN, AND SATIRE

Edición preparada por  
Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa y Karla Marrufo



**THE  
FUNCTION OF THE POET  
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

**BY JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL**

**COLLECTED AND EDITED BY  
ALBERT MORDELL**



**BOSTON AND NEW YORK  
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
MDCCCXX**



### PREFATORY NOTE

IN the winter of 1855, when Lowell was thirty-six years old, he gave a course of twelve lectures before the Lowell Institute in Boston. His subject was the English Poets, and the special topics of the successive lectures were: 1, "Poetry, and the Poetic Sentiment," illustrating the imaginative faculty; 2, "Piers Ploughman's Vision," as the first characteristically English poem; 3, "The Metrical Romances," marking the advent into our poetry of the sense of Beauty; 4, "The Ballads," especially as models of narrative diction; 5, Chaucer, as the poet of real life — the poet outside of nature; 6, Spenser, as the representative of the purely poetical; 7, Milton, as representing the imaginative; 8, Butler, as the wit; 9, Pope, as the poet of artificial life; 10, "On Poetic Diction"; 11, Wordsworth, as representing the egotistic imaginative, or the poet feeling himself in nature; 12, "On the Function and Prospects of Poetry."

These lectures were written rapidly, many of them during the period of delivery of the course; they bore marks of hastiness of composition, but they came from a full and rich mind, and they were the issues of familiar studies and long reflection. No such criticism, at once abundant in knowledge and in sympathetic insight, and distinguished by breadth of view, as well as by fluency, grace, and power of style, had been heard in America. They were listened to by large and enthusiastic audiences, and they did much to establish Lowell's position as the ablest of living critics of poetry, and, in many respects, as the foremost of American men of letters.

In the same year he was made Professor of Belles-Lettres in Harvard University, and after spending somewhat more



than a year in Europe, in special preparation, he entered in the autumn of 1856 upon the duties of the chair, which he continued to occupy till 1877, when he was appointed Minister of the United States to Spain.

During the years of his professorship he delivered numerous courses of lectures to his classes. Few of them were written out, but they were given more or less extemporaneously from full notes. The subject of these courses was in general the "Study of Literature," treating in different years of different special topics, from the literature of Northern to that of Southern Europe, from the Kalevala and the Niebelungen Lied to the Provençal poets; from Wolfram von Eschenbach to Rousseau; from the cycle of romances of Charlemagne and his peers to Dante and Shakespeare. Some of these lectures, or parts of them, were afterward prepared for publication, with such changes as were required to give them proper literary form; and the readers of Lowell's prose works know what gifts of native power, what large and solid acquisitions of learning, what wide and delightful survey of the field of life and of letters, are to be found in his essays on Shakespeare, on Dante, on Dryden, and on many another poet or prose writer. The abundance of his resources as critic in the highest sense have never been surpassed, at least in English literature.

But considerable portions of the earlier as well as of the later lectures remain unprinted, partly, no doubt, because his points of view changed with the growth of his learning, and the increasing depth as well as breadth of his vision. There is but little in manuscript which he would himself, I believe, have been inclined to print without substantial change. Yet these unprinted remains contain so much that seems to me to possess permanent value that, after some question and hesitation, I have come to the conclusion that selections from them should be published. The fragments must be read with the fact constantly held in mind that they do not always represent Lowell's mature opinions;

that, in some instances, they give but the first form of thoughts developed in other connections in one or other of his later essays; that they have not received his last revision; that they have the form of discourse addressed to the ear, rather than that of literary work finished for the eye.

If so read, I trust that the reader, while he may find little in them to increase Lowell's well-established reputation, may find much in them to confirm a high estimate of his position as one of the rare masters of English prose as well as one of the most capable of critics; much to interest him alike in their intrinsic character, and in their illustration of the life and thought of the writer; and much to make him feel a keen regret that they are the final contributions of their author to the treasures of English literature.

*Charles Eliot Norton*



## **HUMOR, WIT, FUN, AND SATIRE**

**HIPPEL**, the German satirist, divides the life of man into five periods, according to the ruling desires which successively displace each other in the human soul. Our first longing, he says, is for trousers, the second for a watch, the third for an angel in pink muslin, the fourth for money, and the fifth for a “place” in the country. I think he has overlooked one, which I should be inclined to place second in point of time — the ambition to escape the gregarious nursery, and to be master of a chamber to one’s self.

How charming is the memory of that cloistered freedom, of that independence, wide as desire, though, perhaps, only ten feet by twelve! How much of future tastes and powers lay in embryo there in that small chamber! It is the egg of the coming life. There the young sailor pores over the “Narratives of Remark-

able Shipwrecks," his longing heightened as the storm roars on the roof, or blows its trumpet in the chimney. There the unfledged naturalist gathers his menagerie, and empties his pockets of bugs and turtles that awaken the ignorant animosity of the housemaid. There the commencing chemist rehearses the experiment of Schwarz, and singes off those eyebrows which shall some day feel the cool shadow of the discoverer's laurel. There the antiquary begins his collections with a bullet from Bunker Hill, as genuine as the epistles of Phalaris, or a button from the coat-tail of Columbus, late the property of a neighboring scarecrow, and sold to him by a schoolmate, who thus lays the foundation of that colossal fortune which is to make his children the ornaments of society. There the potential Dibdin or Dowse gathers his library on a single pendulous shelf — more fair to him than the hanging gardens of Babylon. There stand "Robinson Crusoe," and "Gulliver," perhaps "Gil Blas," Goldsmith's Histories of Greece and Rome, "Original Poems for Infant Minds," the "Parent's Assistant," and (for Sundays) the "Shepherd of Salisbury Plain," with other narratives of the excellent Mrs. Hannah More too much neglected in maturer life. With these are admitted also "Viri Romæ," Nepos, Florus, Phædrus, and even the Latin grammar, because they *count*, playing here upon these mimic boards the silent



but awful part of second and third conspirators, a rôle in after years assumed by statelier and more celebrated volumes — the “books without which no gentleman’s library can be complete.”

I remember (for I must call my memory back from this garrulous rookery of the past to some perch nearer the matter in hand) that when I was first installed lord of such a manor, and found myself the Crusoe of that remote attic-island, which for near thirty years was to be my unmolested hermitage, I cast about for works of art with which to adorn it. The garret, that El Dorado of boys, supplied me with some prints which had once been the chief ornament of my great-grandfather’s study, but which the growth of taste or luxury had banished from story to story till they had arrived where malice could pursue them no farther. These were heads of ancient worthies <sup>1</sup> — Plato, Pythagoras, Socrates, Seneca, and Cicero, whom, from a prejudice acquired at school, I shortly banished again with a *quousque tandem!* Besides those I have mentioned, there were Democritus and Heraclitus, which last, in those days less the slave of tradition, I called Heraclĭtus — an error which my excellent schoolmaster (I thank him for it) would have expelled from my head by the judicious application of a counter-irritant; for he

<sup>1</sup> Some readers may recall the reference to these “heads of ancient wise men” in “An Interview with Miles Standish.” — C. E. N.

regarded the birth as a kind of usher to the laurel, as indeed the true tree of knowledge, whose advantages could Adam have enjoyed during early life, he had known better than to have yielded to the temptation of any other.

Well, over my chimney hung those two antithetical philosophers — the one showing his teeth in an eternal laugh, while the tears on the cheek of the other forever ran, and yet, like the leaves on Keats's Grecian urn, could never be shed. I used to wonder at them sometimes, believing, as I did firmly, that to weep and laugh had been respectively the sole business of their lives. I was puzzled to think which had the harder time of it, and whether it were more painful to be under contract for the delivery of so many tears *per diem*, or to compel that ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα.<sup>1</sup> I confess, I pitied them both; for if it be difficult to produce on demand what Laura Matilda would call the "tender dew of sympathy," he is also deserving of compassion who is expected to be funny whether he will or no. As I grew older, and learned to look on the two heads as types, they gave rise to many reflections, raising a question perhaps impossible to solve: whether the vices and follies of men were to be washed away, or exploded by a broadside of honest laughter. I believe it is Southwell who says that Mary Magdalene went to Heaven by water,

<sup>1</sup> Countless — i.e., perpetual — smile.



and it is certain that the tears that people shed for themselves are apt to be sincere; but I doubt whether we are to be saved by any amount of vicarious salt water, and, though the philosophers should weep us into another Noah's flood, yet commonly men have lumber enough of self-conceit to build a raft of, and can subsist a good while on that beautiful charity for their own weaknesses in which the nerves of conscience are embedded and cushioned, as in similar physical straits they can upon their fat.

On the other hand, man has a wholesome dread of laughter, as he is the only animal capable of that phenomenon — for the laugh of the hyena is pronounced by those who have heard it to be no joke, and to be classed with those *γέλασματα ἀγέλαστα* which are said to come from the other side of the mouth. Whether, as Shaftesbury will have it, ridicule be absolutely the test of truth or no, we may admit it to be relatively so, inasmuch as by the *reductio ad absurdum* it often shows that abstract truth may become falsehood, if applied to the practical affairs of life, because its relation to other truths equally important, or to human nature, has been overlooked. For men approach truth from the circumference, and, acquiring a knowledge at most of one or two points of that circle of which God is the centre, are apt to assume that the fixed point from which it

is described is that where they stand. Moreover,  
 “*Ridentem dicere verum, quid vetat?*”

I side rather with your merry fellow than with  
 Dr. Young when he says:

Laughter, though never censured yet as sin,

Is half immoral, be it much indulged;  
 By venting spleen, or dissipating thought,  
 It shows a scorner, or it makes a fool;  
 And sins, as hurting others or ourselves.

Yet would'st thou laugh (but at thine own expense),  
 This counsel strange should I presume to give —  
 “Retire, and read thy Bible, to be gay.”

With shame I confess it, Dr. Young's “Night Thoughts” have given me as many hearty laughs as any humorous book I ever read.

Men of one idea, — that is, who have one idea at a time, — men who accomplish great results, men of action, reformers, saints, martyrs, are inevitably destitute of humor; and if the idea that inspires them be great and noble, they are impervious to it. But through the perversity of human affairs it not infrequently happens that men are possessed by a single idea, and that a small and rickety one — some seven months' child of thought — that maintains a querulous struggle for life, sometimes to the disquieting of a whole neighborhood. These last commonly need no satirist, but, to use a common phrase, make themselves absurd, as if Nature intended them

for parodies on some of her graver productions. For example, how could the attempt to make application of mystical prophecy to current events be rendered more ridiculous than when we read that two hundred years ago it was a leading point in the teaching of Lodowick Muggleton, a noted heresiarch, "that one John Robins was the last great antichrist and son of perdition spoken of by the Apostle in Thessalonians"? I remember also an eloquent and distinguished person who, beginning with the axiom that all the disorders of this microcosm, the body, had their origin in diseases of the soul, carried his doctrine to the extent of affirming that all derangements of the macrocosm likewise were due to the same cause. Hearing him discourse, you would have been well-nigh persuaded that you had a kind of complicity in the spots upon the sun, had he not one day condensed his doctrine into an epigram which made it instantly ludicrous. "I consider myself," exclaimed he, "personally responsible for the obliquity of the earth's axis." A prominent Comeouter once told me, with a look of indescribable satisfaction, that he had just been kicked out of a Quaker meeting. "I have had," he said, "Calvinistic kicks and Unitarian kicks, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian kicks, but I never succeeded in getting a Quaker kick before." Could the fanaticism of the collectors of worthless rarities be

more admirably caricatured than thus unconsciously by our passive enthusiast?

I think no one can go through a museum of natural curiosities, or see certain animals, without a feeling that Nature herself has a sense of the comic. There are some donkeys that one can scarce look at without laughing (perhaps on Cicero's principle of the *haruspex haruspicem*) and feeling inclined to say, "My good fellow, if you will keep my secret I will keep yours." In human nature, the sense of the comic seems to be implanted to keep man sane, and preserve a healthy balance between body and soul. But for this, the sorcerer Imagination or the witch Enthusiasm would lead us an endless dance.

The advantage of the humorist is that he cannot be a man of one idea — for the essence of humor lies in the contrast of two. He is the universal disenchanter. He makes himself quite as much the subject of ironical study as his neighbor. Is he inclined to fancy himself a great poet, or an original thinker, he remembers the man who dared not sit down because a certain part of him was made of glass, and muses smilingly, "There are many forms of hypochondria." This duality in his mind which constitutes his intellectual advantage is the defect of his character. He is futile in action because in every path he is confronted by the horns of an eternal dilemma, and is apt to come to the conclusion that nothing is very



much worth the while. If he be independent of exertion, his life commonly runs to waste. If he turn author, it is commonly from necessity; Fielding wrote for money, and "Don Quixote" was the fruit of a debtors' prison.

It seems to be an instinct of human nature to analyze, to define, and to classify. We like to have things conveniently labelled and laid away in the mind, and feel as if we knew them better when we have named them. And so to a certain extent we do. The mere naming of things by their appearance is science; the knowing them by their qualities is wisdom; and the being able to express them by some intense phrase which combines appearance and quality as they affect the imagination through the senses by impression, is poetry. A great part of criticism is scientific, but as the laws of art are only echoes of the laws of nature, it is possible in this direction also to arrive at real knowledge, or, if not so far as that, at some kind of classification that may help us toward that excellent property — compactness of mind.

Addison has given the pedigree of humor: the union of truth and goodness produces wit; that of wit with wrath produces humor. We should say that this was rather a pedigree of satire. For what trace of wrath is there in the humor of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne, Fielding, or

Thackeray? The absence of wrath is the characteristic of all of them. Ben Jonson says that

When some one peculiar quality  
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw  
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers  
In their constructions all to run one way,  
This may be truly said to be a humor.

But this, again, is the definition of a humorous character, — of a good subject for the humorist, — such as Don Quixote, for example.

Humor — taken in the sense of the faculty to perceive what is humorous, and to give it expression — seems to be greatly a matter of temperament. Hence, probably, its name. It is something quite indefinable, diffused through the whole nature of the man; so that it is related of the great comic actors that the audience begin to laugh as soon as they show their faces, or before they have spoken a word.

The sense of the humorous is certainly closely allied with the understanding, and no race has shown so much of it on the whole as the English, and next to them the Spanish — both inclined to gravity. Let us not be ashamed to confess that, if we find the tragedy a bore, we take the profoundest satisfaction in the farce. It is a mark of sanity. Humor, in its highest level, is the sense of comic contradiction which arises from the perpetual comment which the understanding makes upon the impressions received

through the imagination. Richter, himself, a great humorist, defines it thus:

Humor is the sublime reversed; it brings down the great in order to set the little beside it, and elevates the little in order to set it beside the great — that it may annihilate both, because in the presence of the infinite all are alike nothing. Only the universal, only totality, moves its deepest spring, and from this universality, the leading component of Humor, arise the mildness and forbearance of the humorist toward the individual, who is lost in the mass of little consequence; this also distinguishes the Humorist from the Scoffer.

We find it very natural accordingly to speak of the breadth of humor, while wit is, by the necessity of its being, as narrow as a flash of lightning, and as sudden. Humor may pervade a whole page without our being able to put our finger on any passage, and say, "It is here." Wit must sparkle and snap in every line, or it is nothing. When the wise deacon shook his head, and said that "there was a good deal of human natur' in man," he might have added that there was a good deal more in some men than in others. Those who have the largest share of it may be humorists, but wit demands only a clear and nimble intellect, presence of mind, and a happy faculty of expression. This perfection of phrase, this neatness, is an essential of wit, because its effect must be instantaneous; whereas humor is often diffuse and roundabout, and its impression cumulative, like the poison of



arsenic. As Galiani said of Nature that her dice were always loaded, so the wit must throw sixes every time. And what the same Galiani gave as a definition of sublime oratory may be applied to its dexterity of phrase: "It is the art of saying everything without being clapt in the Bastile, in a country where it is forbidden to say anything." Wit must also have the quality of unexpectedness. "Sometimes," says Barrow, "an affected simplicity, sometimes a presumptuous bluntness, gives it being. Sometimes it rises only from a lucky hitting upon what is strange, sometimes from a crafty wresting of obvious matter to the purpose. Often it consisteth in one knows not what, and springeth up one can hardly tell how. Its ways are unaccountable and inexplicable, being answerable to the numberless rovings of fancy and windings of language."

That wit does not consist in the discovery of a merely unexpected likeness or even contrast in word or thought, is plain if we look at what is called a *conceit*, which has all the qualities of wit — except wit. For example, Warner, a contemporary of Shakespeare, wrote a long poem called "Albion's England," which had an immense contemporary popularity, and is not without a certain value still to the student of language. In this I find a perfect specimen of what is called a conceit. Queen Eleanor strikes Fair Rosamond, and Warner says,

Hard was the heart that gave the blow,  
Soft were those lips that bled.<sup>1</sup>

This is bad as fancy for precisely the same reason that it would be good as a pun. The comparison is unintentionally wanting in logic, just as a pun is intentionally so. To make the contrast what it should have been, — to make it coherent, if I may use that term of a contrast, — it should read:

Hard was the *hand* that gave the blow,  
Soft were those lips that bled,

for otherwise there is no identity of meaning in the word “hard” as applied to the two nouns it qualifies, and accordingly the proper logical copula is wanting. Of the same kind is the conceit which belongs, I believe, to our countryman General Morris:

Her heart and morning broke together  
In tears,

which is so preposterous that had it been intended for fun we might almost have laughed at it. Here again the logic is unintentionally violated in the word *broke*, and the sentence becomes absurd, though not funny. Had it been applied to a merchant ruined by the failure of the United States Bank, we should at once see the ludicrousness of it, though here, again, there would be no true wit:

<sup>1</sup> This, and one or two of the following illustrations, were used again by Mr. Lowell in his “Shakespeare Once More”: *Works* (Riverside edition), III, 53.

His heart and Biddle broke together  
On 'change.

Now let me give an instance of true fancy from Butler, the author of "Hudibras," certainly the greatest wit who ever wrote English, and whose wit is so profound, so purely the wit of thought, that we might almost rank him with the humorists, but that his genius was cramped with a contemporary, and therefore transitory, subject. Butler says of loyalty that it is

True as the dial to the sun  
Although it be not shined upon.

Now what is the difference between this and the examples from Warner and Morris which I have just quoted? Simply that the comparison turning upon the word *true*, the mind is satisfied, because the analogy between the word as used morally and as used physically is so perfect as to leave no gap for the reasoning faculty to jolt over. But it is precisely this jolt, not so violent as to be displeasing, violent enough to discompose our thoughts with an agreeable sense of surprise, which it is the object of a pun to give us. Wit of this kind treats logic with every possible outward demonstration of respect — "keeps the word of promise to the ear, and breaks it to the sense." Dean Swift's famous question to the man carrying the hare, "Pray, sir, is that your own hare or a wig?" is perfect in its way. Here there is an

absolute identity of sound with an equally absolute and therefore ludicrous disparity of meaning. Hood abounds in examples of this sort of fun — only that his analogies are of a more subtle and perplexing kind. In his elegy on the old sailor he says,

His head was turned, and so he chewed  
His pigtail till he died.

This is inimitable, like all the best of Hood's puns. To the ear it is perfect, but so soon as you attempt to realize it to yourself, the mind is involved in an inextricable confusion of comical *non sequiturs*. And yet observe the gravity with which the forms of reason are kept up in the "and so." Like this is the peddler's recommendation of his ear-trumpet:

I don't pretend with horns of mine,  
Like some in the advertising line,  
To magnify sounds on such marvellous scales  
That the sounds of a cod seem as large as a whale's.

There was Mrs. F. so very deaf  
That she might have worn a percussion cap  
And been knocked on the head without hearing it snap.  
Well, I sold her a horn, and the very next day  
She heard from her husband in Botany Bay.

Again, his definition of deafness:

Deaf as the dog's ears in Enfield's "Speaker."

So, in his description of the hardships of the wild beasts in the menagerie,

Who could not even prey  
In their own way,



and the monkey-reformer who resolved to set them  
all free, beginning with the lion; but

Pug had only half unbolted Nero,  
When Nero bolted him.

In Hood there is almost always a combination of wit  
and fun, the wit always suggesting the remote asso-  
ciation of ideas, and the fun jostling together the  
most obvious concords of sound and discords of sense.  
Hood's use of words reminds one of the kaleidoscope.  
Throw them down in a heap, and they are the most  
confused jumble of unrelated bits; but once in the  
magical tube of his fancy, and, with a shake and a  
turn, they assume figures that have the absolute per-  
fection of geometry. In the droll complaint of the  
lover,

Perhaps it was right to dissemble your love,  
But why did you kick me down-stairs?

the self-sparing charity of phrase that could stretch  
the meaning of the word "dissemble" so as to make  
it cover so violent a process as kicking downstairs  
has the true zest, the tang, of contradiction and sur-  
prise. Hood, not content with such a play upon ideas,  
would bewitch the whole sentence with plays upon  
words also. His fancy has the enchantment of Huon's  
horn, and sets the gravest conceptions a-capering in  
a way that makes us laugh in spite of ourselves.

Andrew Marvell's satire upon the Dutch is a  
capital instance of wit as distinguished from fun. It

rather exercises than tickles the mind, so full is it of  
quaint fancy:

Holland, that scarce deserves the name of land,  
As but the offscouring of the British sand,  
And so much earth as was contributed  
By English pilots when they heaved the lead,  
Or what by ocean's slow alluvium fell  
Of shipwrecked cockle and the muscle-shell;  
This indigestful vomit of the sea  
Fell to the Dutch by just propriety.

Glad, then, as miners who have found the ore  
They, with mad labor, fished their land to shore,  
And dived as desperately for each piece  
Of earth as if 't had been of ambergrease  
Collecting anxiously small loads of clay,  
Less than what building swallows bear away,  
Or than those pills which sordid beetles roll,  
Transfusing into them their sordid soul.

How did they rivet with gigantic piles  
Thorough the centre their new-catchèd miles,  
And to the stake a struggling country bound,  
Where barking waves still bait the forcèd ground!

Yet still his claim the injured ocean laid,  
And oft at leap-frog o'er their steeples played,  
As if on purpose it on land had come  
To show them what's their *mare liberum*;  
The fish ofttimes the burgher dispossessed,  
And sate, not as a meat, but as a guest;  
And oft the Tritons and the sea-nymphs tan  
Whole shoals of Dutch served up as Caliban,  
And, as they over the new level ranged,  
For pickled herring pickled Heeren changed.  
Therefore necessity, that first made kings,  
Something like government among them brings;

And as among the blind the blinkard reigns  
 So rules among the drownèd he that drains;  
 Who best could know to pump on earth a leak,  
 Him they their lord and Country's Father speak.  
 To make a bank was a great plot of state,  
 Invent a shovel and be a magistrate;  
 Hence some small dykegrave, unperceived, invades  
 The power, and grows, as 't were, a king of spades.

I have cited this long passage not only because Marvell (both in his serious and comic verse) is a great favorite of mine, but because it is as good an illustration as I know how to find of that fancy flying off into extravagance, and that nice compactness of expression, that constitute genuine wit. On the other hand, Smollett is only funny, hardly witty, where he condenses all his wrath against the Dutch into an epigram of two lines:

Amphibious creatures, sudden be your fall,  
 May man undam you and God damn you all.

Of satirists I have hitherto said nothing, because some, perhaps the most eminent of them, do not come under the head either of wit or humor. With them, as Juvenal said of himself, "*facit indignatio versus*," and wrath is the element, as a general rule, neither of wit nor humor. Swift, in the epitaph he wrote for himself, speaks of the grave as a place "*ubi saeva indignatio cor ulterius lacerare nequeat*," and this hints at the sadness which makes the ground of all humor. There is certainly humor in "Gulliver," especially in the chapters about the Yahoos, where the



horses are represented as the superior beings, and disgusted at the filthiness of the creatures in human shape. But commonly Swift, too, must be ranked with the wits, if we measure him rather by what he wrote than by what he was. Take this for an example from the “Day of Judgment”:

With a whirl of thought oppressed  
 I sank from reverie to rest,  
 A horrid vision seized my head,  
 I saw the graves give up their dead!  
 Jove, armed with terrors, burst the skies,  
 And thunder roars, and lightning flies!  
 Amazed, confused, its fate unknown,  
 The world stands trembling at his throne!  
 While each pale sinner hung his head,  
 Jove, nodding, shook the heavens, and said:  
 “Offending race of human kind;  
 By nature, reason, learning, blind,  
 You who through frailty stepped aside,  
 And you who never fell through pride,  
 You who in different sects were shammed,  
 And come to see each other damned  
 (So some folks told you — but they knew  
 No more of Jove’s designs than you) —  
 The world’s mad business now is o’er,  
 And I resent these pranks no more —  
 I to such blockheads set my wit!  
 I damn such fools! Go, go! you’re bit!”

The unexpectedness of the conclusion here, after the somewhat solemn preface, is entirely of the essence of wit. So, too, is the sudden flirt of the scorpion’s tail to sting you. It is almost the opposite of humor in one respect — namely, that it would

make us think the solemnest things in life were sham, whereas it is the sham-solemn ones which humor delights in exposing. This further difference is also true: that wit makes you laugh once, and loses some of its comicality (though none of its point) with every new reading, while humor grows droller and droller the oftener we read it. If we cannot safely deny that Swift was a humorist, we may at least say that he was one in whom humor had gone through the stage of acetous fermentation and become rancid. We should never forget that he died mad. Satirists of this kind, while they have this quality of true humor, that they contrast a higher with a lower, differ from their nobler brethren inasmuch as their comparison is always to the disadvantage of the higher. They purposely disenchant us — while the others rather show us how sad a thing it is to be disenchanted at all.

Ben Jonson, who had in respect of sturdy good sense very much the same sort of mind as his namesake Samuel, and whose "Discoveries," as he calls them, are well worth reading for the sound criticism they contain, says:

The parts of a comedy are the same with [those of] a tragedy, and the end is partly the same; for they both delight and teach: the comics are called *didaskaloi* <sup>1</sup> of the Greeks, no less than the tragics. Nor is the moving of

<sup>1</sup> Teachers.

laughter always the end of comedy; that is rather a fowling for the people's delight, or their fooling. For, as Aristotle says rightly, the moving of laughter is a fault in comedy, a kind of turpitude that depraves some part of a man's nature without a disease. As a wry face moves laughter, or a deformed vizard, or a rude clown dressed in a lady's habit and using her actions; we dislike and scorn such representations, which made the ancient philosophers ever think laughter unfitting in a wise man. So that what either in the words or sense of an author, or in the language and actions of men, is awry or depraved, does strongly stir mean affections, and provoke for the most part to laughter. And therefore it was clear that all insolent and obscene speeches, jests upon the best men, injuries to particular persons, perverse and sinister sayings (and the rather, unexpected) in the old comedy did move laughter, especially where it did imitate any dishonesty, and scurrility came forth in the place of wit; which, who understands the nature and genius of laughter cannot but perfectly know.

He then goes on to say of Aristophanes that

he expressed all the moods and figures of what was ridiculous, oddly. In short, as vinegar is not accounted good till the wine be corrupted, so jests that are true and natural seldom raise laughter with that beast the multitude. They love nothing that is right and proper. The farther it runs from reason or possibility, with them the better it is.

In the latter part of this it is evident that Ben is speaking with a little bitterness. His own comedies are too rigidly constructed according to Aristotle's dictum, that the moving of laughter was a fault in comedy. I like the passage as an illustration of a fact undeniably true, that Shakespeare's humor was

altogether a new thing upon the stage, and also as showing that satirists (for such were also the writers of comedy) were looked upon rather as censors and moralists than as movers of laughter. Dante, accordingly, himself in this sense the greatest of satirists, in putting Horace among the five great poets in limbo, qualifies him with the title of *satiro*.

But if we exclude the satirists, what are we to do with Aristophanes? Was he not a satirist, and in some sort also a censor? Yes; but, as it appears to me, of a different kind, as well as in a different degree, from any other ancient. I think it is plain that he wrote his comedies not only to produce certain political, moral, and even literary ends, but for the fun of the thing. I am so poor a Grecian that I have no doubt I miss three quarters of what is most characteristic of him. But even through the fog of the Latin on the opposite page I can make out more or less of the true lineaments of the man. I can see that he was a master of language, for it becomes alive under his hands — puts forth buds and blossoms like the staff of Joseph, as it does always when it feels the hand and recognizes the touch of its legitimate sovereigns. Those prodigious combinations of his are like some of the strange polyyps we hear of that seem a single organism; but cut them into as many parts as you please, each has a life of its own and stirs with independent being. There is nothing that



words will not do for him; no service seems too mean or too high. And then his abundance! He puts one in mind of the definition of a competence by the only man I ever saw who had the true flavor of Falstaff in him — “a million a minute and your expenses paid.” As Burns said of himself, “The rhymes come skelpin, rank and file.” Now they are as graceful and sinuous as water-nymphs, and now they come tumbling head over heels, throwing somersaults, like clowns in the circus, with a “Here we are!” I can think of nothing like it but Rabelais, who had the same extraordinary gift of getting all the *go* out of words. They do not merely play with words; they romp with them, tickle them, tease them, and somehow the words seem to like it.

I dare say there may be as much fancy and fun in “The Clouds” or “The Birds,” but neither of them seems so rich to me as “The Frogs,” nor does the fun anywhere else climb so high or dwell so long in the region of humor as here. Lucian makes Greek mythology comic, to be sure, but he has nothing like the scene in “The Frogs,” where Bacchus is terrified with the strange outcries of a procession celebrating his own mysteries, and of whose dithyrambic songs it is plain he can make neither head nor tail. Here is humor of the truest metal, and, so far as we can guess, the first example of it. Here is the true humorous contrast between the ideal god and the god with

human weaknesses and follies as he had been degraded in the popular conception. And is it too absurd to be within the limits even of comic probability? Is it even so absurd as those hand-mills for grinding out so many prayers a minute which Huc and Gabet saw in Tartary?

Cervantes was born on October 9, 1547, and died on April 23, 1616, on the same day as Shakespeare. He is, I think, beyond all question, the greatest of humorists. Whether he intended it or not, — and I am inclined to believe he did, — he has typified in *Don Quixote*, and Sancho Panza his esquire, the two component parts of the human mind and shapers of human character — the imagination and understanding. There is a great deal more than this; for what is positive and intentional in a truly great book is often little in comparison with what is accidental and suggested. The plot is of the meagrest. A country gentleman of La Mancha, living very much by himself, and continually feeding his fancy with the romances of chivalry, becomes at last the victim of a monomania on this one subject, and resolves to revive the order of chivalry in his own proper person. He persuades a somewhat prosaic neighbor of his to accompany him as squire. They sally forth, and meet with various adventures, from which they reap no benefit but the sad experience of plentiful rib-roasting. Now if this were all of “*Don Quixote*,” it would

be simply broad farce, as it becomes in Butler's parody of it in *Sir Hudibras* and *Ralpho* so far as mere external characteristics are concerned. The latter knight and his squire are the most glaring absurdities, without any sufficient reason for their being at all, or for their adventures, except that they furnished Butler with mouthpieces for his own wit and wisdom. They represent nothing, and are intended to represent nothing.

I confess that, in my judgment, Don Quixote is the most perfect character ever drawn. As Sir John Falstaff is, in a certain sense, always a gentleman, — that is, as he is guilty of no crime that is technically held to operate in defeasance of his title to that name as a man of the world, — so is Don Quixote, in everything that does not concern his monomania, a perfect gentleman and a good Christian besides. He is not the merely technical gentleman of three descents — but the *true* gentleman, such a gentleman as only purity, disinterestedness, generosity, and fear of God can make. And with what consummate skill are the boundaries of his mania drawn! He only believes in enchantment just so far as is necessary to account to Sancho and himself for the ill event of all his exploits. He always reasons rightly, as madmen do, from his own premises. And this is the reason I object to Cervantes's treatment of him in the second part — which followed the other after an interval of

nearly eight years. For, except in so far as they delude themselves, monomaniacs are as sane as other people, and besides shocking our feelings, the tricks played on the Don at the Duke's castle are so transparent that he could never have been taken in by them.

Don Quixote is the everlasting type of the disappointment which sooner or later always overtakes the man who attempts to accomplish ideal good by material means. Sancho, on the other hand, with his proverbs, is the type of the man with common sense. He always sees things in the daylight of reason. He is never taken in by his master's theory of enchanters, — although superstitious enough to believe such things possible, — but he *does* believe, despite all reverses, in his promises of material prosperity and advancement. The island that has been promised him always floats before him like the air-drawn dagger before Macbeth, and beckons him on. The whole character is exquisite. And, fitly enough, when he at last becomes governor of his imaginary island of Barataria, he makes an excellent magistrate — because statesmanship depends for its success so much less on abstract principle than on precisely that traditional wisdom in which Sancho was rich.







## ÍNDICE

Portada original .....	9
Prefatory Note .....	11
Humor, Wit, Fun, and Satire .....	15











**C**on estilo ligero, abundante en anécdotas y ejemplos, James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) ofrece sus reflexiones en torno a la presencia del humor, el ingenio y lo satírico en la literatura. Surgido de charlas impartidas en 1855, este libro plantea una interrogante: los vicios e insensateces de los hombres, ¿deben ser eliminados por completo o confrontados con la risa honesta?

Más que responder a la pregunta, Lowell explora los matices que diferencian al ingenio del humor, así como los puntos de contacto existen entre éstos y la sátira. El humor es abarcador, impreciso, se va construyendo mediante una sucesión de impresiones acumuladas, y su sentido se enriquece conforme se repiten las lecturas. El ingenio, por su parte, es como un relámpago, pues su efecto debe ser inmediato, producto de la sorpresa o lo inesperado, y ha de presentarse como la síntesis perfecta de una expresión original. En contraste con los dos anteriores, la sátira implica una cierta carga de ira o cólera, que lleva a Lowell a criticar esta forma literaria en autores como Swift.

Para Lowell, Aristófanes, Rabelais y Cervantes son los máximos representantes de la sátira literaria, pues “no sólo juegan con las palabras, sino que se acuestan con ellas, les hacen cosquillas, se burlan de ellas y, en muchas formas, a las palabras parece gustarles”.